EMANUEL (MANNY) STEEN

Oral history: EDITED VERSION
Birth Date: June 23, 1906
Interview EI-33 by Paul E. Sigrist, Jr. on March 22, 1991
Immigrated from Dublin, Ireland, at the age of 19
Arrived August 2, 1925 on the *Caronia*.

Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.

*Your dramatic skit will focus mainly on Manny Steen's experience **after** coming to the United States. As you read, think about how his skills or personality traits helped him face these challenges.*

STEEN *(shown above, from his immigration visa, 1925)*: Father came to Glasgow (Great Britain) from London. To arrive in London he came from Turkey. He had escaped from the Cossacks in 1891 during a *pogrom* in the Ukraine in a village near Odessa. [**NOTE:** Ukraine is now independent. At the time, it was part of the Russian Empire.] The family was massacred, my father's parents. My father and his brother Jack escaped. They hid out and they took a ferry boat to Constantinople [now Istanbul, Turkey]. They got a job aboard a merchant vessel as a seaman, jumped ship in London, which was typical of the time. In New York here, too. Many thousands of people jumped ship here...

The Jews were on the run in the 1800's. They were looking for shelter. My mother's parents were from a village near Warsaw, Poland. The refugees from Poland and from Eastern Europe walked across Europe to the port of Hamburg and emigrated to [what] they hoped [was] America. What did happen was there were sea captains with the boats, boats of any kind and description, unseaworthy, took these refugees. For twenty dollars [they] supposedly would take you to America. You had to provide your own food and bedding. They supplied water and toilet facilities.

So they crowded these horrible little vessels in the port of Hamburg and set sail for ostensibly the United States. After about, once they got out in the harbor everybody got seasick. They couldn't care less where they were. These captains of these illegitimate boats dumped a load of refugees on the east coast of Scotland [part of Great Britain] during the night in a little seaport. They just dumped them and they said, "This is America," and they took off. The government agreed to [let] them stay provided they did not become a burden upon the government, economic burden.

My father and his brother went from London to Glasgow, a big ship-building port. They got a room in the Jewish section and there my father met my mother. After a few years, a depression set in. My father went down to Dublin [Ireland]. At that time [all of] Ireland was part of Great Britain. He got a job in Dublin. As soon as he had a few dollars he brought the family over.

What drove Manny's father to Great Britain? His mother?

Why did the family then go to Dublin, Ireland?

We were just ordinary Irish kids. We didn't feel any different. If you asked one of us, "I'm Irish," understand, and my whole background, the music, Irish history. I was Irish, nothing else. Jewish, well, that's a religion. That's not a nationality. So I enjoyed life very much there. It was a lovely, wild country.

The Revolution broke out and there was holy Hell. The rebels took the general post office and a couple of the main hotels and, as a matter of fact, I have a picture of my mother in the garden. Some sniper had taken a pot shot of my mother. Next morning we found a bullet hole in one of the windows in the backyard. *(Right: Manny's mother, Minnie, with bullet hole.)*

We came back to Dublin. *(Left: the Steen family in Dublin.)* Now [Manny's father] bought a small factory. I think we had about ten or twelve people working there. We made pants. I was entering college, Saint Andrew's College in Dublin. I went there and in 1921 my father died in an accident. He was eating in a friend's house and they were joking and kibitzing and he choked on a piece of meat by the time the ambulance came, because they were horse drawn ambulances. By the time the ambulance came he was gone.

My uncle had assumed command of the family and he said, "We can't go on." They discovered when my father died [that] he had lived it up with the income and there weren't any reserves and that I had to stop college. So my uncle says, "You're going to America. That's all there is….You'll apply for a passport and a visa to come to America." You couldn't get in without a visa and you have to have a passport.

SIGRIST: Why did Uncle Jack decide that you should go to America?

STEEN: There was no money, nothing to do. Ireland was going through a terrible state. By 1921 civil war broke out and it was awful. There were street ambushes and killings and murders, like what's happening in the North [today], almost as bad as that. And finally, in 1922, England signed a treaty with Ireland. Ireland became a free state. In the meantime I had applied in 1921. My uncle said, "The economy is nothing." I mean the country is shot to Hell, see? Unemployment was rife and what are you going to do?

Why did things get so bad in Ireland?

Do you think Manny felt closer to his Jewish or his Irish home? Explain.

We were required to have twenty dollars as to show financial independence. Would you believe it? When I came through Ellis Island I had twenty dollars. I had it in my shoe so I shouldn't lose it or, God forbid, lose it gambling on the ship and I didn't gamble. I didn't know how to play poker, frankly.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people [at Ellis Island]?

STEEN: Oh! Must have been, that day there must have been three, four ships. It must have been five, six thousand people. Jammed! And remember, it was August. Hot as a pistol and I'm wearing my long johns and a heavy Irish tweed suit. Got my overcoat on my arm. It was the beginning of fall back home, see?...You don't realize this is history in the making. You're just an immigrant. You want to get in and get the hell out of there and get off, you understand?

The guards, as we called them there, the customs officers and immigration officials, slammed a tag on you with your name, address, country of origin, et cetera. Everybody. They didn't ask you whether you spoke English or not. They took your papers and they tagged you. That was the first thing. They checked your bag. They had to go through your baggage and then they pushed you. They just pushed you. They'd point because they didn't know whether you spoke English or not. Nobody asked me. They had too many. Understaffed. Over crowded. Jammed. And the place was the noisiest and the languages and the smell.

SIGRIST: What did it smell like?

STEEN: Foul, you know what I mean? But I am nineteen. I can stand a lot then. "Get out of here fast," you follow me? Then you had to go through the physical. I think, frankly, the worst memory I have of Ellis Island was the physical because the doctors were seated at a long table…and you had to, uh, reveal yourself. Right there in front of everyone, I mean, it wasn't private! And the women had to open their blouse. Remember, these were immigrants from a very reticent people. I was nineteen and I was embarrassed as hell, you know. I had to open my trousers and fly and they would check you for venereal disease or hernia or whatever they were looking for.

I felt this was very demeaning. But it wasn't personal. But nevertheless it's a very unpleasant memory and I just thought they didn't have to do it that way. But remember, this is the height of immigration. They were coming in by the thousands. The day I was there I saw maybe three, four, five thousand. I just want to get through there and get out.

What did immigrants need to get into the US?

Describe what Manny saw, did and smelled when he was at Ellis Island.

Finally I got through and my brother who was supposed to claim me, my claimant, you had to be claimed by a responsible person. My brother didn't show up so I'm waiting. They won't let me

go on the ferry boat until I was claimed because he had to come across and claim me. Bea, my sister Bertha, was with me.

It's four o'clock. The island closed at four and the staff went home. Anyway, so they shipped me over to the depot on the other side of the island, the Ferry Building, and I was held there in a group pen for unclaimed, O.K.'d immigrants…They closed at five.

…They say, "We close up here. Where's your...?" I said, "I don't know." I had no phone or nothing. I didn't know where he lives or what. Anyway, they called up the HIAS, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, who would be responsible, traveler's aid society like but this is the Hebrew immigrants. About fifteen minutes later this little, short chap came in and the funniest thing was he, knowing that we were Jewish, he insisted upon talking Yiddish. I didn't speak Yiddish, I spoke English, follow me? But in college I had to take a couple years of German…he said, *"Comm mit* [come with]." [Steen and his sister follow.]

[They go to the HIAS office on Lafayette Street.]…My brother Henry comes in the door and I said, "Where were you?" [His] Boss wouldn't let him off: "You want to get off? Don't come back." [Manny's brother] said, "You know, it's my job." He had traced us. He had gone to the island and they sent him there and he back traced, and he found us.

[My brother, sisters and I lived] in East Harlem, 118th Street between Second and Third, Third Avenue. It was a mixture of Italian and Jewish, follow me? About fifty-fifty. And it was a…very friendly neighborhood. Everybody more or less knew each other, follow me, and the apartment was a typical three, uh, two bedroom apartment, I think we had. This was the height of luxury, you know what I mean? They had a bathroom and a refrigerator and a cooker.

Why didn't Manny's brother come to get them on time?

Why would the man from HIAS assume Manny spoke Yiddish?

This was a Wednesday, remember? Thursday morning I'm up bright and early. It's like seven o'clock and Henry is up too and he's getting ready. I say, "Where are you going?" He says, "I gotta go to work." I says, "What will I do?" He says, "Today you take off. Tomorrow you get a job." I said, "All right." He's the older brother so he's the boss. I said, "What'll I do?" He says, "Take a trolley car and go downtown. Take a look around." I says, "How much it costs?" He said, "A nickel." I said, "What's a nickel?" [The brother explains what a nickel and a dime are.]

So the trolley car stopped and I got on and I sat down and the conductor, he came over. And the conductors on the Third Avenue Railroad were all Irish and a lot of immigrants. And he says, "What are you doing, young fellow?" At that time, spoke with a brogue. And I says, "Just taking a ride downtown." He says, "Is it Irish you are?" I says, "Aye." He says, "When did you get here?" I said, "Yesterday. I just got off the boat!" (he laughs) He says, "Why didn't you tell me that? I wouldn't have charged you the nickel." (everyone laughs) And so he sat down beside me and he's giving me a free tour, you know, all the way down Third Avenue. He's pointing out the buildings.

[He gets off the trolley car.] There's a street sign. It says "Broadway." Broadway! I'm only one day in America and I'm on Broadway. I mean, it may sound like nothing to you but I got so

excited. Anyway, so I started walking down Broadway and I…see the Woolworth Building. Now I knew about the Woolworth Building and I walked down to see this tremendous world edifice. What an exciting experience to see that bloody building…When I looked up, the building looked like it was teetering forward, you know what I mean? I guess it wasn't falling but I had a feeling of hallucination that the building was going to fall down so I kept going.

And down below I see Battery Park, where the day [before] I had come across from Ellis Island. I walked across Battery Park there, and I sit down on the bench and nobody is bothering me. No one could identify me as a foreigner, you know, and everybody's acting like I'm a full blooded American.

And there was a guy with a pushcart. This guy was selling hot dogs. Now I had known about hot dogs from watching American movies in Dublin. They don't have hot dogs in Ireland. They have sausages. So, look, it was only five cents so I figured I would speculate [try it out], you know what I mean? So I asked for a frankfurter and he gave me a frank and he wanted to put all the stuff on it. "No, no, no," I say.

People were scooping mustard on it. I was accustomed to English mustard. You know what that's like, Coleman's mustard? That's enough to burn your guts out. I said, "How can all these people eat with all that mustard on there?" I ate it and it tasted nice. It was garlicky, you know, and I had never tasted anything like it. I was there eating my hot dog and taking the world in with my eyes and I say, "Eh, one day in America. I got it made."

And as I walked I saw there was one guy selling ice cream. A nickel a sandwich, They used to sell, in those days, ice cream sandwiches, follow me? Five cents. I think I would speculate [try it out]….I had a hot dog and an ice cream and I sat down and walked around the buildings I was seeing and seeing all the foreigners coming in from Ellis Island (he laughs), you know. It was a great feeling. Absolutely.

Why do you think the conductor gave Manny a personal tour?

How do you think Manny felt about "all the foreigners coming to Ellis Island"?

SIGRIST: When did you get a job?

STEEN: The next day. (everyone laughs) The next day my brother says, "Get a job." So I say, "Where?" Anyway, he was working for American Express. I think he was driving a truck. I don't know what he was doing with them. Anyway, he said, "Try American Express." So I went down there and they hired me as an hourly worker…The shipping clerks would bring the stuff down. I was a tally clerk. And they'd bring the bags, the packing cartons down. I'd give them a receipt for it.

The truck drivers for American Express were all Irish, too, and they were kidding the shirt off me because I had an Irish accent, very strong accent at the time. I worked there for twenty five cents an hour and within a month I was getting forty cents an hour and I would work six days, seven days a week. I worked sixty hours a week. It didn't make any difference. I really worked. I worked for them until the week before Christmas. They laid off all their temporary workers.

When you get a little extra gravy we were laid off. All the temporary, the hourly workers. I was as mad as hell…

My uncle in Liverpool was manager of the Cunard Line [a famous line of ships] and he had given me a letter of introduction to New York Edison[’s] employment manager. He said he had known him in Ireland. And the letter of introduction [said], “This…will introduce my nephew, Manny Steen…of good character,” et cetera.

I went down to Edison on First Avenue, I think it was…[to] the main office, and to get the employment manager you must have had to go through about three secretaries to get in to see him…finally, I got in. I had sent a note in advance and when I came in, oh, it was this beautiful mahogany office and he treated me like a long lost brother and said, “How’s your uncle?” He says, “You’ll do well here. We’re looking for people like you,” and so on. And he says to me, “When can you start?” and I said, “Now.” And he says, “Well, you have to fill out the form,” the application.

So this is 1925. I fill out the application and I’m sitting there and I’m glowing. God Almighty, I can see where I’m going. There’s no end in sight. I gave him the application and he’s reading it through and he’s taking to me and...All of a sudden his face fell down to here (he gestures) and he said, “Didn’t you make a mistake here, young fellow?”

It says “religion” and I put down Hebrew. In Ireland Jews are called “Hebrews,” see? I said, “Oh, no.” He said, “Your father or your mother?” I said, “No, no. Both parents are Hebrews. “Ah,” he said, “Ah, that’s too bad.” He says, “You know, I don’t make the rules here,” he says, “But they don’t hire Hebrews.” This is 1925 and he takes the application and he’s tearing it up and all of a sudden [it felt] like an area of ice in between [us]. Freezing cold. This is my first contact with open anti-Semitism.

I said to him I didn’t understand this. Remember, I was nineteen. Ireland was a free society, I mean. We recognized our different religions and that’s all. I mean, so you’re Jewish or you’re Protestant. So what’s the difference? There wasn’t the bitterness then that there is now in the north of Ireland, for instance.

SIGRIST: Well, how did you feel about this?

STEEN: I felt terrible. Anyway, I said to him, “I don’t understand. I’m the same guy I was five minutes ago. What are you telling me?” He says, “We don’t hire Hebrews. ‘Jews’ we call them here. We don’t hire them. I said, “Why?” He says, “It’s a company rule. I don’t make the rules.” But he said, “Look, a friend of mine up in Pittsburgh, I’ll give you a note to him.” I left there... you know how desolated I felt? Good things have been happening and all of a sudden *pow*! I didn’t recognize it as anti-Semitism. This was a new experience. Finally I said, “Enough, enough with this crap.”

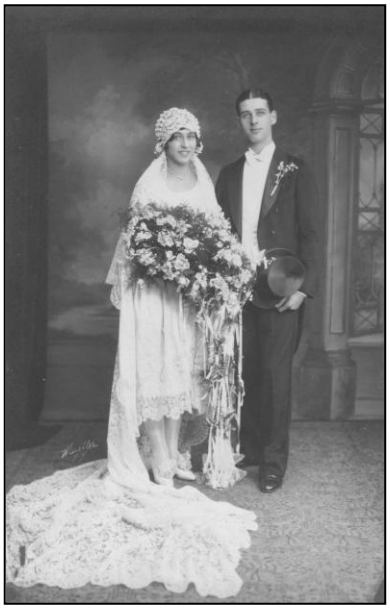
What is *anti-Semitism*?

How do you think the man at Edison felt about turning Manny away?

Nowadays, can an employer ask you about your religion on a job application?

[Back in Ireland] I took a crash course in wireless [sending messages in Morse code over the telegraph], which was a new invention at the time. Wireless telegraphy. I had a certificate, a diploma. The next day I go down [to] Cortlandt Street, New York, which was the center of the radio industry… At that time you used to have to build your own radio, what we called a "bread board set"…you bought the parts, the condensers and the tuners…Well, I knew this stuff. I had the technical training…while I was in wireless telegraphy…the basic radio was a very simple phenomena and I understood it. *(Right: Manny's sketch of himself as a telegraph operator. From a letter to his brother Saul, who he called "Solly.")*

One [store was] called Walthall's...The busiest place, that's the best place to go for a job. I couldn't get into the store. There were salesmen shoulder to shoulder behind the counter, about fifty salesmen, about two or three hundred people jamming the store.



And at the end of the floor is the floor walker, this bald headed guy. I said, "Hey, I'm looking for a job…I'm a wireless operator." Eight o'clock Monday morning I'm down there and they hired me on the spot. I was the only guy who knew anything about it. Those guys were selling it [radios] but they knew nothing [about them], see? The first thing you know I'm in charge of the department. I'm taking home twenty five dollars a week…I never saw such money in my life. Within a year I was assistant manager...

(Left: Manny's wedding photo, with wife Mary.) When I got married in 1928, [building owner Walter] Nussbaum calls me in and says, "Manny, for your wedding present I'm going to give you your own store." He gave me a managership... By that time I was making sixty, seventy dollars a week. At this point I was willing to work, without quibble, any hours. I would do anything. And I was eager, bright and willing and not stupid, you know. Maybe not brilliant but not stupid and, anyway, we were off and running.

Why did Manny get this job so easily when he could not get the job at Edison?

What reasons does Manny give for his success after he got the job selling radios?

All images (except on page 1, from Manny's immigration visa) courtesy of Ivan Steen.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **Emanuel (Manny) Steen** **FROM:** _____

YEAR he came to the US: _____ **AGE** upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did his family decide to send him to America?

BECAUSE: